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AUTHOR Gordon, June A.
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ABSTRACT

This study explored the issue of respectability and the changing image of public school teachers through interviews with 140 teachers of color in 3 urban school districts--Cincinnati (Ohio), Seattle (Washington), and Long Beach (California). Almost half the respondents felt that either the negative image or low status of teaching was one of the reasons that students of color were not entering the profession of teaching. This assessment seemed to have little to do with money and a great deal to do with self-respect as defined in terms of dress, posture, and "class." A strong consensus indicated that a professional image was important to people of color. Though reasons for this varied, they appeared to be a combination of a need to be acknowledged as a college graduate versus a laborer, and a desire to gain respect that many felt was lacking from the dominant culture. When asked whether there had been a decline in respect for teachers, participants' responses were mixed. Many perceived themselves as leaders within their communities, as professionals, and claimed that their communities and their families did respect teachers. A conclusion is that a general devaluing of teaching among the majority culture may be the most significant influence on minority teachers' sense of reduced respect. (JB)

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THE RESPECTABILITY AND CHANGING IMAGE OF TEACHERS AS SEEN BY TEACHERS OF COLOR

by

June A. Gordon

Western Washington University
Bellingham, Washington

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Jean A. Gordon

THE RESPECTABILITY AND CHANGING IMAGE OF TEACHERS AS SEEN BY TEACHERS OF COLOR

Abstract

This paper explores the issue of respectability and changing image of public school teachers through interviews with 140 teachers of color in three urban school districts: Cincinnati, Ohio, Seattle, Washington, and Long Beach, California. It is telling that almost one half of the respondents felt that either the negative image or low status of teaching was one of the reasons that students of color are not entering the profession. This assessment seemed to have little to do with money and a great deal to do with self-respect as defined in terms of dress, posture, and "class." There was strong consensus that a professional image is important to people of color. The reasons varied but appeared to be a combination of a need to be acknowledged as a college graduate versus a laborer, and a desire to gain respect that many felt was lacking from the dominant culture.

The judgement that there has been a decline in respect for teaching was mixed. Many informants perceived themselves as leaders within their communities, as professionals, and claimed that their people and their families did respect teachers. The problem seemed to lie less with communities of color and more with the dominant society which devalued teaching.

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The selection of teachers was done by principals identifying minority teachers within their schools and inviting them to participate. I had no involvement in the choice of teachers. Semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews from one to three hours were supplemented with documentation and observation within the schools.

Profiles of the three school districts. What the three school districts hold in common is the fact that they are large and urban and serve diverse student populations. Where they differ is in the composition of student populations and, especially, in the patterns of migration and immigration of their minority populations. The Cincinnati school population is basically "black/white" with sixty-three percent of the students African American, thirty-five percent white, less than one percent Asian, and one percent "other." Some teachers in Cincinnati were not even aware that "minority" denoted anything other than African American. Many of the "whites" in Cincinnati are Appalachian providing yet another layer to the concept of "diversity."

Seattle, in contrast, is considered "integrated." This was usually translated as meaning the schools have a balance between Asian, black, white and Native students. There has been a large Asian population in Seattle for over a hundred years, mainly Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino. As in many urban areas, Southeast Asians are a newer and increasingly important immigrant group. Seattle is also the urban center for many of the Northwest tribes. The respect for Native culture, at least superficially, is readily apparent.

Out of the three districts, Long Beach has the largest non-white school age population. Given the proximity to the Mexican border and historical roots, Long Beach has always had a strong Latino presence. Historically, Long Beach has been an important port for immigrants from all parts of the world as well as African Americans migrating from the South. Most recently, immigration has swelled from Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. At present African Americans make up eighteen percent of the school age population, white twenty-five percent, Asian seventeen percent, Latino thirty-four percent, Filipino three percent, Pacific Islander two percent, and less than one percent Native American. What is particular to the Long Beach school system is the linguistic diversity that is added to the cultural and economic diversity of the students. At the middle school level, some schools have as many as fifty-nine percent of their students LEP (limited English proficiency). In the high schools this drops to twenty-nine percent, mostly due to the soaring drop-out rate of LEP students. Economic disadvantagement similarly strikes Long Beach the hardest. Eleven out of the fifteen middle schools have more than fifty percent "economically disadvantaged" students, one is as high as eighty-eight percent. High schools fare a little better, but not much.

When looking at the teaching staff for the three districts, a comparable pattern emerges among the cities. Cincinnati, with its sixty-three percent African American student population, has forty

percent of its staff African American. Seattle, with fifty-seven "minority" students, has twenty-three percent teachers of color. Long Beach, with the largest "minority" school age population of seventy-five percent, has the lowest percentage of teachers of color: twenty-one percent.

Given the large differences between the numbers of minority teachers in the three districts and my attempt to interview approximately the same number of teachers of color in each district, the proportion of all teachers of color interviewed varied; in Cincinnati, it was four percent, all African American; in Seattle, it was seven percent; and in Long Beach, it was six percent. Seattle and Long Beach districts offered representation from all ethnic groups, though Long Beach had more Latino interviewees and Seattle had more Asian and Native American.

The varied types of schools visited provided some insurance against bias. All of the schools included in this study are considered "inner city," with both a preponderance of students of color and their "quota" of teachers of color. In each district all three levels of K-12 schools (elementary, middle, and high school) were represented. I visited schools that ranged from elite "Latin prep" to "project" schools as well as "alternative" schools who work with special populations. Some of these are defined along ethnic lines, others on academic terms such as vocational schools; and still others are thematically delineated such as academies for "the basics" or the arts.

Interviewer as variable. A variable in any research is the interviewer. As an individual, I come to this work having had 42 years of experience in communities of color with people from diverse backgrounds in the United States and other countries. As a scholar, I have done previous research and writing in this area using open-ended interviewing techniques with notable success. Being raised in an inner city and having attended multiracial, multilingual public schools increases my awareness of the lives of the students within the schools I interviewed. While not a person of color myself, I was raised in a lower income working-class family by parents who were not born in this country and who refused to assimilate into American society. A gift resulting from this upbringing is an acute awareness of differences in class, race, and language. My upbringing also provided me with the ability to develop trust quickly with most people, regardless of their orientation. Trust provides the basis for establishing a sense of integrity and honesty in the interviews for this research. The fact that I have lived in a variety of cultures and am able to speak other languages further enables me to break through many of the walls of fear that might surround other researchers who have not been able to participate in the larger conversations of communities foreign to their experience. Further research on the questions of this study would certainly gain from a diversity of interviewers.

THE RESULTS

In the interviews, African Americans who were either raised in the South or have parents who were raised there were shocked at the low level of teachers' status in mainstream society. More than any other group I spoke with, African Americans were the most likely to comment on the fact that teachers should be treated and paid the same as doctors, and, to a lesser extent, the same as lawyers. Many African Americans reminisced about life in the South. Their perception was that while there was segregation, a Black community provided leadership and cohesion. As the following informants claimed,

> Fifty years ago it [teaching] was highly respected; teachers were the brightest and the best. (28) [Author's note: Numbers alone in parentheses refer to a master list of informants]

> Yes, education is respected, even though I left the South at an early age, it's still ingrained in me. The Black community has respect for teachers. School [in the South] was in charge of community life. That's the reason Black parents don't get so involved; they presume that teachers are handling things. Education is their job. (88)

> Teaching is more respected in the South; teaching was a more prideful job. Teachers looked at pay separate from their job. They felt that if they failed the student, they [as teachers] failed too, and would try a different approach. Kids don't fail by themselves. (101)

> There was more respect in the South. As African Americans began moving, teaching became less respected because there were more options. People flow with the money. (105)

Many of the ideas that African American teachers hold about the status of teachers are based on the African American experience in the South, from Post-Reconstruction to WW II, when teaching was one of the few professions that Blacks could enter and when teaching was viewed as the most productive way to bring about the uplift of the race. Because of this, teaching was elevated to a level unparalleled in mainstream society. Due to the stature that Black teachers had in the South, they became role models and community leaders. This included adopting appropriate manners, dress and speech. The deviation from this sense of propriety is seen by many African Americans as the source of the decline in the status of teachers and in education itself. Several teachers explained the logic behind this attitude,

> Educators don't present themselves; they dress down, drive old cars. Kids see what is immediately visible, status. (10)

> It started in the 70s when teachers started wearing T-shirts and jeans and teachers treated students like peers. This is the cause of the loss of respect. I tell kids to dress for success, but teachers don't do it. They [students] see a

connection between what they [teachers] wear and what they [teachers] earn. (78)

The perception of teacher comes from appearance, enthusiasm, sincerity, neatness. We should dress for success. (40)

The way teachers carry themselves does not engender an interest in teaching. (80)

A frequently heard comment on the image and status of teaching was that "teaching isn't glamorous." (74) This idea was not regional, but it did seem to be cultural. It was not mentioned by Latinos, Native Americans or Asians as a consideration for their people. It was only used by African Americans as in the following comments,

Teaching is not viewed as a profession that is exciting and glamorous, [so it] doesn't attract youth. (15)

It's not as glamorous as engineering. You don't hear fabulous things about teachers anymore. (11)

In the west, teaching is not glamorous. You're subject to unionization and strikes like everyone else. In my parents' background teachers are up there with doctors and lawyers. Teaching is different now, I feel like a common laborer. (16)

Some teachers, while understanding that "glamour" is what kids buy into, do not support the idea themselves and actually see the perpetuation of this need as dangerous. As put emphatically by one African American woman,

Some kids say that they want to be a lawyer, kids are living in fantasy land; it's what they see on TV. They're not in homes where they have professional families staying up late doing homework. They don't know how much it takes to be a lawyer. Kids only see glamour, nice cars, nice clothes. Even those who are failing think that they are going to college. It's the deception of the media. They don't know what it all entails. Even when they see Black professionals all they see are the clothes. Until they know reality, we can't motivate them. They are out of touch with reality. (90)

The excessive interest in materialism and immediate gratification demonstrated by today's youth was foreign to some of the informants. A mixed-race male informant explained,

The redirection of the entire culture places the emphasis on monetary gains versus the JFK image that I grew up with. In my age group [fortyish] we had a consciousness that is different from today's. Students are now more disoriented; the family is fragmented. (15)

Another informant disparagingly suggested, "They don't see it as important to be a leader." (31)

Further exceptions to the African American focus on status and image came from those informants who were second and third-generation professionals and/or who had tried other careers before coming into teaching. A Black male teacher warned not to give in to the "gold chain theory": the idea that in order to make teaching more attractive to some minorities you must make a display of wealth and status. He stated,

> Pragmatism won't work. Don't make teaching more glamorous. Kids must align themselves with what teaching is all about, the well-being of society. (15)

What was not discussed in the interviews with African Americans was the reality that with desegregation came the loss of many of the professional jobs once held by African Americans. Teaching was the most heavily affected. While the Great Migration North did open up some options in fields previously closed to Blacks in the South, it also shut out many qualified teachers from a profession that had provided them with status and influence. The movement for money did not correlate highly with positioning for power. Did teaching lose its respectability in the Black community because money became more important than education or because African Americans were no longer allowed to teach their children? One informant clarified his view,

> No, I don't think education is a priority in the Black family; we don't have excellence and discipline. My parents and grandparents had it different; they were respected. Respect for authority is gone. (55)

One young woman discarded the whole notion of trying to talk about African Americans as a group. She explained,

> I don't think that there is a 'Black community.' My mother respects teaching. She was raised in Mississippi, where the only educated people in town were teachers. The younger the person, the less valuable education is and the person that dispenses the tool is not valued [teacher]. (92)

But there did seem to be some hope. Alluding once again to the South, an older male teacher offered some perspective,

> Historically, teaching has been an esteemed profession for Blacks. This has been eroded. But in the last five years there has been a reversal in this. People are beginning to see how important teaching is to their children's future. (17)

LATINO

In contrast to African Americans, Latino informants believed that teachers, in general, are respected in the Latino community and that they receive respect from their students. Teachers from other ethnic groups, however, did not agree. Their perception was that Latino parents did not respect teachers. It appeared to come down to communication; Latino teachers were able to talk to the

parents in Spanish, they understood some of the cultural differences between "Hispanic" groups, and they were more willing (less afraid) to contact the parents personally. The following comments reflected these assumptions,

> Latino parents value education as much as Asian. (35)
>
> Hispanics respect teachers. Parents see teachers as one place to go with problems. If they are in trouble, they go to the pastor or to the teacher. They see teachers as leaders. We are like parents to the students; they bring home problems to school. Teachers have a status. Anglos might think that teaching is lower status because they have to slow down because students are not white. (4)
>
> Yes, Hispanic culture does reinforce teaching and education. This is in contrast with the larger culture that stresses money over education. Teaching is valued but students are not encouraged to go into teaching because it is not seen as significant, more like baby-sitting. Personally, I think it is one of the most sane professions there is. (72)

The variation in the degree of respect attributed to teachers by the Latino community was greatest between those who had recently come to the United States and those who have been here for several generations. This was true for Asian American students as well. This difference in attitude appeared partially related to class but more so to the assimilation of the "dominant culture's" values. If we view the African American experience of desegregation as a form of immigration into mainstream society, we can see in all groups a pattern of decreased respect for education and teaching when there is increased contact with white society. The next few statements make this correlation clearer,

> Adults who need English respect the teacher, those most recently from Mexico. Younger people often don't as much. (1)
>
> First generation are more serious; second are more acculturated. (15)
>
> In my society [Honduras] teaching has a lot of respect. With new immigrants you still have the respect. But those who have been here longer get their values from their peers and it is really bad to be a teacher's pet. Teachers in the Mexican American community are not respected as much. Here have to deal with students disrespectful behavior and the general public's idea that teaching is not a good job. (9)

NATIVE AMERICAN

The Native American view on respect for education was mixed. This should not be surprising when one considers the havoc that boarding schools played in the disruption of family life and traditional values. There was consensus, however, that education in the broadest sense was respected. This is in contrast to institutional schooling which has a dubious reputation in Native

American history.

An example of the confusion on the issue of formal schooling is echoed in these accounts,

> Yes, my grandmother was very proud. There is an old Indian saying, 'Go my son, go get an education; go my son, get off the reservation.' But I lost my place with my family. College education did not include a Native American family or values. I believe that you shouldn't have to give up family to live in academia. It is not unusual to have Native Americans quit school because they are homesick. When I go home friends are afraid to talk to me, afraid they'll say something wrong. (77)

> My people think I think that I'm better than them, so they resent me [because I am educated]. (42)

> Yes, education is respected, but teachers are all Anglos so you are not associated with your own. (30)

> Yes, it's respected, but my mom would say 'I can't help you, I'm too stupid'. She was in awe of it [schooling], but it was nothing that she could identify with, and this began as early as the first grade. (112)

As one Native teacher stated, "Our emphasis is on living with the world; our tradition does not place a value on formal education." (36) Conflict arises over attendance problems during seasonal festivals, Pow Wows, funeral rites, and other cultural events. Participation in such traditional Native gatherings is not only important but obligatory for children to learn the knowledge and skills essential to their own heritage and survival. To many middle-class teachers unfamiliar with Native ways, this lack of continuity and respect for schooling can easily be interpreted as a lack of caring. In fact, these gatherings are what Native people consider to be a part of a real education. As explained by one Native teacher,

> Corporate America says a certain type of people succeed. The rules don't fit with our culture; i.e. look employer in the eye, pushing people to succeed. We're a laid back society. (110)

ASIAN AMERICAN

The Asian American viewpoint (and this is defined here by interviews with teachers of Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese backgrounds) was frequently explained in terms of tradition. Traditionally, the status of teachers in Asia has been very high. Based primarily on Confucian values which dictate respect for relationships and hierarchy, Asian cultures tend to have seen teachers as part of the elite. While this is gradually being eroded with capitalist influences, the respondents in this study had been raised under the more traditional system. Two Vietnamese American informants reflected sadly, "Vietnamese [teachers] back

home are very respected, but not here." (32/89)

One Japanese American teacher claimed that there are important differences between her people's view of education and other ethnic groups,

> Asians have high respect for education, especially Japanese Americans. Their demands and respect are different from other minorities. We are taught perseverance. All our myths, stories, even T.V. programs are around those who overcame great odds to get where they are. (75)

She continued in her illumination of the differences in attitudes about education among various "Asian" groups,

> The new wave of Southeast Asians are different; they are from an agricultural background. [This is significant because most Japanese are from urban areas where a high degree of emphasis is placed on formal schooling.] Many of their parents have never been in a formal school setting before. The earlier immigrants were more highly educated and valued education more. Vietnamese are highly educated, but Cambodian and Laotian are not so. (75)

A similar comparison was made regarding Cuban immigrants. The earlier immigrants were more educated than the later. The idea of "contamination" by American values is also shared between Latino and Asian Americans. A Chinese American teacher explained,

> The status [of teachers here] is not as high as in Asian countries. Education is valued [by Asians] but as Asians stay here longer, they become more like Americans and lose respect. (23)

However, status is also a product of a tightly woven community in which individuals are responsible for the care and maintenance of the overall unit. Teachers were and still are seen as conduits to a life beyond the community. Competitive testing systems where only a few succeed increase the status of those who facilitate that success. Perks in the form of gifts, community positions, etc. for teachers, as well as doctors and other service professionals, far outweigh the importance of money. As one informant said,

> In Asia, status is gained through a combination of money and power but in the U.S. only money and a fancy car give you status. (32)

The following Asian American respondents further expounded on the connection between status and money. This is significant because in many Asian countries teachers have prestige without high pay. But as one individual pointed out, "In America money equals prestige." (97) The emphasis on how one acquires status in the "New World" is not lost on parents either. Entire shifts in values and professional goals have been affected as highlighted in this comment,

> In the Asian American community, teachers are not seen as prestigious. Asian parents want status for kids. Asians now

say that teaching is not good enough. (97)

Another teacher supported this view,

> The profession in Vietnam is highly respected; it has the same status of doctor or lawyer. In this society it is not equivalent of those professions. (6)

CLASS

Some respondents qualified their statements along class lines, claiming that certain groups of individuals more or less respected teaching depending on their socioeconomic status. The correlation between one's level of education and one's income is not lost on the respondents, "Those parents who are more educated, do [respect teaching]. But for the lower class, you get it anyway you can." (57) "Teaching is highly valued by families, especially parents of honors students. Average students don't care." (2)

> The Hispanic community is varied as to socioeconomic strata; it's more important than ethnic group. The value of education is related to socioeconomics. Hispanics value education. As I was growing up, my father valued education. [Her mother is white] (5)

> It depends. In middle-class Hispanic communities, the image of teachers has changed. But for the lower-class, those in this area, its a week-to-week existence. They are just concerned with getting through the day. They know to send their kids to school, but they are not concerned with what is going on in school. For them, they may not even have a perception of teachers. (13)

But the next Latina teacher saw things the other way around,

> It depends on who you are talking to; the working class respect teachers more; other professionals don't. The issue of respect is complex and intertwined with status. (79)

If we follow Rury's (1986) contention that teachers are drawn from the middle class, and if the dominant culture is what is being emulated, then theoretically people of color should not look down on teaching from the perspective of status. One African American woman was livid when I mentioned at the end of her interview that it was interesting that she had not mentioned pay as an issue since so many other informants had stated it as their first reason. She lashed back, "I don't believe that Blacks have told you that pay is the main issue; then why do white teachers go into teaching?" (63)

INDIVIDUAL VS. COMMUNITY PERCEPTION

There was an apparent contradiction between society's lack of respect for teachers and the individual respect that teachers received from their own students, in their community, and among friends. It was difficult at times to determine where they were getting the perception of lack of respect. These comments

exemplify the contradictions,

> Personally, I get respect, but overall not, because of the income issue. In the past teachers had lots of respect. (78)

> Not [respected] in general, in the community, but I'm respected [as an individual], because I work hard. (98)

> No, there's not as much [respect] as used to be; but I receive respect in my community. I've taught in the community that I live in for years. (54)

> Within my own circle I am respected, maybe in the community too. But because of the system we are not respected. I feel a professional within my own classroom but not in the system. They don't give teachers credit. There are impossible demands made on us. (65)

> I live in the community with these kids. My junior high students helped me move into my house. If you give respect, you get it. It doesn't matter what race. It has to do with rapport with kids. Kids don't trust adults; never lie to them. (61)

THE MEDIA

One of the main sources perpetuating this negative image of teachers is said to be the media. As the following respondents suggested,

> Teachers in the media are either idiots or the enemy, a non-entity. On TV, kids are always smarter than the teacher. Kids think that we don't know what's going on. (38)

> TV portrays Blacks as negative, helpers are white.(95)

> The TV image outweighs everyday reality; the image becomes a reality. (103)

> Teaching as a profession has been denigrated; the image tends to run hot to cold. On one hand if you can't do, you teach; you're second best. On the other extreme, you're a wimpy crusader. Kids have to decide where the reality lies between these. (103)

In addition to the lack of a professional image, many teachers, male and female, stated that the feminization of the field is one of the main discouragements for students of color in general and males in particular. A young well-to-do African American woman bluntly proclaimed,

> Women in a work force lower the status of the field. (55)

Another who had only been teaching two years agreed,

> As long as the majority of teachers are women, it will be negatively perceived as a "nice" profession. Females are seen as less than capable. (38)

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

For this study, interviews with teachers of color were designed to obtain one set of expert perceptions regarding the respectability of teachers and how the image of teachers has changed within their respective communities of color. The interviewing of minority teachers is but one component in a larger effort to understand how to both increase the number of teachers of color and to improve the preparation of all teachers for work in schools with a diverse student population.

One of the questions that guided this inquiry ran as follows: Given that teaching has traditionally been viewed as an avenue for economic and social mobility, what are the areas of discouragement and/or attitudinal changes which are affecting the decisions of people of color not to select teaching as a career? As anyone who is familiar with the ethnic/racial, immigrant, and migrant history of America is aware, when, where, and in what social class, one moved to, or across, affects one's predisposition for adaptation to American values, norms and institutions. The respondents interviewed on their perceptions of the teaching profession took such factors seriously when crafting their statements.

To a large extent, the informants' personal testimony varied greatly depending on which ethnic group they identified with, where they were raised, what values they were raised with, if they were first-generation college or not, etc. But even these subgroups did not provide coherence. What became most obvious is that there never has been homogeneity within "minority" communities; and what commonalities may have been shared due to segregation or regionalism have been fractured. The forces and influence of the larger society have been too great to keep certain values intact over time. This may be one more of those strange outcomes of desegregation and the gradual integration into mainstream society. Through participation in the dominant culture, the values of that culture are adopted, adapted, and internalized. Those who are not successful at such adaptation are left behind and are often seen as a drag on those who are successful. Those who continue to extend themselves to those "less fortunate" are often viewed as fools, even by those they seek to help. Ours is a society based on rugged individualism and capitalism, a potent combination which mitigates against "reaching back." Once those individuals who have been trapped by race, language, or class are "over", they are often "out."

IMPLICATIONS

Almost one half of the respondents felt that either the negative image or low status of teaching was one of the reasons that students of color are not entering the profession. This assessment seemed to have little to do with money and a great deal to do with self-respect as defined in terms of dress, posture, and "class." There was strong consensus, stated over and over again, that a professional image is important to people of color. The reasons given varied but appeared to be a combination of a need to be acknowledged as a college graduate versus a laborer, and a

desire to gain respect that many felt was lacking from the dominant culture.

The judgement that there has been a decline in respect for teaching was mixed. Many informants perceived themselves as leaders within their communities, as professionals, and claimed that their people and their families did respect teachers. The problem seemed to lie less with communities of color and more with the dominant society which devalued teaching.

Both the image presented by teachers and the respect given teachers by a community rest within the ways the majority culture and minority cultures interact with a professional culture. Within both the non-American home cultures and/or the minority communities, teachers are both more respected and present a more elite image than within the American majority culture. When minority teachers attempt to present themselves accordingly, they are resisted both by the lack of respect from the majority culture and by the less elite image adopted by most teaching professionals from the majority culture. Teachers of color, including newer immigrants, are expected to adopt the norms of majority culture and its teachers while also attempting to meet the expectations for their elite position within communities of color.

If mainstream America refuses to give respect to teachers then how can we expect "minority" cultures who are expected to emulate and assimilate into the dominant culture's values to respect teachers. The dominant white liberal view claims that we should be respected based on our capabilities, not on the way we present ourselves. However, professional people of color are aware that:

1. it is important to differentiate themselves from their own people based on class in order to demonstrate not only their personal success, but also a respect for the profession of teaching as traditionally held within ethnic minority cultures.

and,

2. once they leave the protected space of their job/school they are on their own as representatives of their race. The dominant culture often will treat them based on how they look.

and,

3. they must provide an example for children of their own community as a role model and for children of other cultures in order to break down stereotypes and to develop a positive image of teaching by a person of color.

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